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ABSTRACT

A crossnational study compared secondary school boys' and girls' social (individual attitudinal, and family) and linguistics (type/frequency of oral conversations and test related activities) experience, and their relation to differential writing performance. Subjects included more than 1000 secondary students in their final year of compulsory schooling from each of three countries: Chile, Sweden, and the United States. Data from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement 1984 study of writing composition were subjected to t-tests, factor analyses, and regression analyses. Results indicated that: (1) in all three countries, girls and boys engaged in distinct activities in their families; (2) in all countries, girls' performance was superior to that of boys; (3) similar factors describing experiences emerged in all three countries, including "family conversation," "student attitudes," and "student literacy activities"; and (4) the model predicted performance in writing much better in Sweden than in the United States or Chile. Findings suggest support for previous qualitative research findings on differences in discourse forms used by males and females, and extended this concept to writing and to differences in different written discourse forms. Findings also highlight the different opportunity structures for males and females as they impact performance and choice in education. (RS)

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SOCIAL AND LINGUISTIC SOURCES OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN WRITING COMPOSITION

Ruth Schick - NRC December 1992 - Draft For Discussion Purposes

TOPIC: Crossnational comparison of secondary school boys' and girls social (individual attitudinal, and family) and linguistics (type/frequency of oral conversations and text related activities) experience, and their relation to differential writing performance.

RATIONALE: Need for empirically based concept of cultural basis of gender as it relates to school literacy, in place of assumption of differences based on biological sex, and test cultural limits of this approach by conducting cross national comparison of the results.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: Literacy as cultural and historical practice intertwined with the socio-cultural identity of groups. Literacy of groups as defined by socioeconomic conditions and cultural beliefs which affect the incentives (costs and benefits of access to and use of texts) fro acquisition and practice of literacy. Gender as social group markers associated with differential emotional, social, and economic opportunities and rewards affecting use of language and literacy.

DATA SET: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement 1984 Study of Writing Composition
Data for Chile, Sweden and the U.S. on secondary students at the final year of compulsory education. Survey responses from students on family background, family interaction, peers, and school and occupational attitudes and aspirations. Composite scores based on wholistic and analytical scoring of student compositions on two types of written discourse, informative, argumentative/persuasive. N>1000 for all countries. Sample stratification based on country specific criteria. No ethnic or geographical data available. No occupational data available in Sweden.

METHOD

T-tests to compare sex differences in responses to survey items on: conversations with parents, parental support of literacy, student attitudes to literacy, and time students spend on literacy related activities.

Factor analyses to reduce survey responses to factors describing linguistic, attitudinal, and literacy experiences.

Regression Analyses to test importance of factors in predicting two types of writing: informative and persuasive a) on full sample for each country, for using sex as proxy variable to test amount of variance attributable to sex but not explained by the available variables. b) on separate samples of boys and girls, to contrast power of factors to predict the performance one group as compared to the other.

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RESULTS: Differences in Social and Linguistic Experience: In all three countries girls and boys engaged in distinct activities in their families. Girls engaged more frequently in activities close to the home. Girls engaged in a wider range of topics of conversations than did boys. Girls spent more time on homework than did boys. More girls report their friends like to read. Girls found writing more interesting than did boys.

Differences in Performance: In all countries girls' performance was superior to that of boys. Differences in performance varied for the tasks: in some countries the gender gap was largest on different tasks than in other countries.

Factors: similar factors describing experiences emerged in all three countries. Factors entered into the regression analyses included "family conversation" "student attitudes" "student literacy activities".

Predicting Performance: The model predicted performance in writing much better in Sweden than in the U.S. or Chile. It was a better predictor of persuasive than informative writing in Chile, but a better predictor of informative than persuasive writing in Sweden. The strength of the proxy variable "SEX" was much greater in Sweden. When tested on single sex sample, the model's power to predict writing performance differed for girls and boys. Further, the power of the model to predict one type of writing compared to the other varied across countries. In some countries the model predicted girls' writing in one task better than boys, but was a better predictor of boys' performance in the other type of writing. In some countries the model predicted boys' writing better than girls' by a large margin. In other countries and for other tasks, the model's power to predict performance was roughly the same for both sex groups. Attitudinal and social class variables, and not linguistic variables were the strongest predictors of performance for both types of writing, except in Sweden, where frequency of family discussion was a strong predictor. Social class was a stronger predictor of girls' than boys' performance for both tasks, and for all countries.

DISCUSSION:

Concept of Gender: reaffirmed notion of distinct but overlapping sets of incentives shaping male and female literacy development. Supported previous qualitative research findings on differences in discourse forms used by males and females, and extended this concept to writing and to differences in different written discourse forms. Supported notion of differences in communicative experiences of males and females for three countries in study, but showed differences in importance of variables for predicting educational performance. Supported concern that crossnational differences in gender (as a cultural category) affect meaningfulness of use of sex as a proxy variable for gender in models of educational achievement.

Cross-national Comparison: Significant problems in interpretation of results suggest a) that qualitative and observational data be used in combination with quantitative/survey based data to aid 1) in generation of variables which are meaningful in different cultural settings, and; 2) to interpret significance of variables which are included in the quantitative analyses. and b) more attention is required for developing sampling frameworks which are both nationally and cross-nationally meaningful. Current study's limitations: eg. How to account for different explanatory power of variables in different countries?; differences in relation of gender to explanatory power of models for different types of writing in different countries.

Policy Implications: Study highlights importance of different opportunity structures for males and females as they impact performance and choice in education. But study cannot evaluate relative importance of home and school gender socialization as affecting performance and educational choice. Study also highlights differences in factors affecting development of writing literacy in different discourse forms. With regard to gender differences in performance: Classroom level pilot interventions suggested are a)boy and girls partners for alternative discourse form, co-operative writing assignments b) explicit instruction in alternative discourse formats with emphasis on relevance to different gender groups. c) explicit re-evaluation of gender and interpretaive frameworks throug se of disourse models of male and female authors with attention to opinion and reflective pieces.